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Roadside Encounters Safety Tactics (R.E.S.T.): A Tool in Preventing Secondary Collisions at Crash Sites, Traffic Stops, and Other Roadside Duties

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ABSTRACT

Roadside duties performed by law enforcement officers contain hazards posed by approaching traffic. These dangers must be eliminated to reduce the number of secondary collisions involving police officers and police vehicles. Law enforcement agencies must provide training and improve the methods already in place to prevent secondary collisions. In order to develop a safer method of preventing secondary collisions, a sample of what law enforcement agencies are already doing was obtained through surveys. The results of those surveys illustrate that more could an should be done. This author researched several law enforcement books and journals that provide information on the inherent dangers of investigating highway accidents and performing other roadside duties. That research inspired ideas on how to improve the safety factor of roadside encounters by training personnel through what the author labeled as Roadside Encounters Safety Tactics (R.E.S.T.). It is through continuous training in the prevention of secondary collisions that the goal of reducing such hazards could best be achieved. Developing R.E.S.T. for the law enforcement community and implementing those tactics in their training and in the performance of their duties will help them meet the goal.

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INTRODUCTION

The City of Corpus Christi is experiencing an inordinate number of secondary collisions during the investigation of accident scenes or collisions during traffic stops and other duties performed on public roadways. Officers investigating or providing traffic control at crash sites are prone to the many hazards created by the collisions they are sent to investigate. Officers are also in harms way when they stop or assist motorists or pedestrians on public roadways. One Corpus Christi officer was killed directing traffic; some have been incapacitated and unable to work while many others have sustained less severe injuries. Injury to officers is not the only problem facing the Corpus Christi Police Department (CCPD) today. The department continues to lose much of its fleet of police cruisers as well. Many of the vehicles are being wrecked and placed out of service temporarily while many others are being totaled as a result of secondary accidents or other public service duties performed on roadways.

Dangers posed by approaching traffic must be eliminated as best and as quickly as possible. The CCPD must look at what it is already doing to reduce the number of secondary collisions or roadway accidents during the performance of these duties. Then the department must implement a method of strategically positioning police vehicles at these scenes for optimum safety to the public, the police officers and department vehicles.

The purpose of this research is to answer the concerns of the command staff as to the number of police vehicle accidents that the department is presently experiencing. This research will seek an answer to the question of how command staff can assist in reducing secondary accidents. Line personnel and department supervisors were asked

a two-pronged question. First, they were asked if they thought that the department had an unusually high rate of secondary collisions. Second, could officers, supervisors, and the department do more to prevent such accidents? Uniform Division and Traffic Officers' daily activities include working several traffic accidents, conducting numerous traffic stops, and assisting both motorists and pedestrians on public roadways. By the nature of their job duties, the officers have a tremendous opportunity to make some personal observations and can provide historical data as to the number secondary accidents over the past years. These officers are a valuable source of inquiry. The information they provide can be used in conjunction with their knowledge of and experience with accidents to develop a plan to overcome the inherent dangers and risks involved anytime they and other officers are performing their duties on the public roadways. Unfortunately, no roadway situation is exactly the same every time. Therefore, it will be essential to scrutinize all the information gathered to discover what officers and supervisors can do to greatly reduce the accident rate. Although it may not be possible to determine what should be done in every situation, a viable solution should be sought and implemented immediately.

Patrol and traffic supervisors have a broad responsibility in overseeing the safety of line personnel and have greater opportunity to observe what officers are doing to protect the public, themselves and the police cruisers. The fact that a supervisor has not been personally involved in a secondary collision or has been a supervisor over someone who has, could be an indicator that they have been very fortunate or that they having been doing something right. By combining their tactics and those tactics

recommended by experts a proposal should be devised that could be applied in Corpus Christi.

A survey of a class of thirty law enforcement officers and professionals at A & M College Station, College for Executive Development and another class of twenty-six at Texas Women's University will be conducted to learn if their departments provide training in the prevention of secondary or other roadway accidents. By looking at these and other law enforcement agencies including Texas DPS, should provide an array of preventive measures being taught in their academies and actually practicing in the field. A review of library resources should provide insight from the most recent articles on traffic safety. And lastly, review of the recruit-training curriculum at the Corpus Christi Police Training Academy will reveal what they are teaching in the classroom and what practical skills are being taught in their driver safety courses.

The research will demonstrate that the majority of law enforcement agencies are already informally teaching traffic safety to their officers and the officers are applying good or excellent accident prevention tactics on the roadways. However, many of those agencies continue to experience secondary collisions or other roadway accidents when performing their duties. Through formalized training and application of Roadside Encounters Safety Tactics (REST) the Corpus Christi Police Department will improve what it is already doing to prevent secondary and other related collisions and to reduce the rate of such accidents in law enforcement community.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This researcher is a police supervisor with the Corpus Christi Police Department and is concerned with the number of officer injuries and police vehicles destroyed due

to secondary traffic accidents. A police lieutenant (R. Diaz, personal communication, June 8, 2003) describes a double secondary collision that had occurred during the evening shift. A police officer stopped on a freeway to assist a citizen with a stalled vehicle was about to exit his cruiser when it was struck from behind by a minivan. The officer sustained neck and head injuries and was transported to a hospital. While the officers were on the freeway directing traffic and waiting for a traffic investigator to arrive, a drunk driver struck an unoccupied police cruiser. Crash reporting is an essential element used by law enforcement executives in developing ways to improve roadway safety (Mulholland & Snyder, 2002). Yet, this author is not aware of any documentation that was initiated by the CCPD concerning the double secondary collision or others like it specifically aimed at preventive strategies to address such potentially fatal collisions. A police captain (J. Houston, personal communication, August 1, 2004) assigned a specially equipped police cruiser with the latest technology in light bars to its fleet. The factory sets a three-position switch that operates the light bar, in twenty different configurations. Officers were asked to use this cruiser as much as possible during a test period to determine if the current light bar configuration was sufficient. The department has received monies in the new budget to upgrade its emergency equipment. The plan calls for maximum use of this equipment by the officers as the department is preparing to bid for new light bars for some of the units that will provide visibility and enhance safety issues.

The City of Corpus Christi is not alone in its concern about the dangers of roadside encounters. The problem of secondary collisions is pervasive. A “Move Over” law was passed in Texas effective September 1, 2003. The statute requires that drivers

nearing a stopped emergency vehicle that has its lights activated to vacate the lane used by the emergency vehicle and slow done to a designated speed (Texas Journey, September/October 2003).

An accident reconstruction expert used the term secondary accident to describe accidents that occur at crash sites. He provides ways to reduce the incidence of secondary collisions by abdicating prevention techniques the moment that an officer receives the call on through the time he clears the scene. Everything the officer does in getting to the scene on through the moment that he leaves the area contributes the overall safety of his roadside encounter (Paul, 2002). A police officer responding to an accident scene allegedly caused an accident with his manner of parking (Quinlan, 2002).

Traffic accidents remain a common cause of death in law enforcement. The 911 terrorist attacks claimed the lives of 23 officers in 2001 at the World Trade Center. While that number represents the highest number of officers killed in a single incident, out of the 163 officers who died in other incidents that year, 78 died in traffic related events. Twenty-three of those died after being struck by cars or trucks driven others (Crime Control Digest, 2002).

Public safety employees need to assess what how they can improve their safety records. In 1999, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration recorded 15 traffic fatalities involving ambulances, 19 involving fire trucks and 72 involving police vehicles (Green, 2002). A later article by the same author describes the traffic stop as, “among the most dangerous law enforcement activities.” (p.12). She reiterates, “Officers run the

risk of being hit by traffic every time they step out of their cars to investigate crashes or write tickets" (Green, 2002, p. 13).

Public safety personnel share a concern with construction personnel in making highway travel less deadly. A grand jury indicted a 23-year-old man for intoxication manslaughter for running into a Dallas police officers car, sparking a fire that killed the officer. The driver hit the rear of the Ford Crown Victoria police cruiser in October 2002 while the officer was working off-duty as an escort for construction crews as part of a major highway construction project (The Blues, 2003). A troop commander takes traffic enforcement to a higher level by suggesting the use of undercover troopers to catch construction zone speeders under Operation Hardhat. Each year, the average number of people injured is 40,000 while 829 are killed in highway mishaps at these work sites (Carrick, 2002). First responders can look at how construction crews are setting up "safe zones" and what they can do to improve their own safety records by finding ways to reduce secondary collisions.

A deputy sheriff was struck and killed December 2002 while working a minor traffic accident on a highway (The Blues, 2003). Another article states that squad car footage reveals that a state trooper followed protocol in a traffic stop that killed a boy. The four-year-old boy died after a car he was riding in was struck by an 18-wheeler as it sat on the shoulder of an interstate. The trooper that parked further away from the road was not injured. In this incident the trooper did not have enough time to tell the driver to move her car further away from the road (The Blues, 2003).

The executive director of the Concerns of Police Survivors (COPS) believes that some of the 230 officers that gave the ultimate sacrifice in 2001 could have taken action

to prevent their death by wearing their personal body armor. Body armor has saved officers more than 2,600 times by stopping bullets and lessening their life-threatening injuries in vehicular accidents and other police encounters (Sawyer, 2002).

Even community policing has its place in accident prevention where it was used successfully in California to tame the most dangerous routes in the state and reducing the number of deaths and injuries (Helmick, Metzinger, & Steffens, 2002).

This research began by questioning what law enforcement can do to reduce secondary accidents? The search was given direction after reading an issue of Police Fleet Manager, which featured an article concerning reactions to emergency lights. The article reads that different colored lights are perceived and recognized differently by drivers and points out which colors help to provide the safest traffic crash scenes for officers. The author, who is a specialist in traffic incident management programs, compares the objective distances and colors to subjective comments about color. While white is the brightest, amber is the least distracting at night, therefore the best choice.

The author makes his recommendations on how to effectively use the light bar and dispels the idea that lighting provides a safety barrier. He warns against the use of emergency lighting as traffic control devises and prefers cones, flares and signs. He goes on to explain that emergency lighting should provide a clear and simple message to the public and not one that is confusing (Karczewski, 2002).

While some officers fail to see the value of traffic enforcement, traffic supervisors should remind officers that police presence has a positive effect on the behavior of drivers and pedestrians. With increased presence, drivers will slow down to avoid getting a traffic citation and they adjust their driving habits accordingly. The use of high

visibility patrols will reduce accident frequency in those areas as they do at accident scenes, traffic stops and other roadside duties.

METHODOLOGY

What can command staff do to reduce the number of secondary accidents? Command staff can implement a standard operating procedure for traffic safety developed by experts in the field. Then initiate an educational program to train all officers, supervisors and managers in safe traffic control methods. The department can begin with more intensive training in the police academy that includes practical exercises in traffic safety. Field training officers will continue teaching proper traffic control techniques to graduating recruits and a standard operating procedure (S.O.P.) will be taught to veteran officers during their in-service training.

The S.O.P. should be evaluated, tested and revised periodically. Secondary collisions will continue to occur throughout the United States and they may even continue to occur in one's own city. Because it is difficult to devise an S.O.P. that will cover every accident scenario, it will be necessary to review any future accidents in or outside our agency. Creating a traffic safety magazine or web site authored by experts who review secondary collisions and make immediate change recommendations of R.E.S.T. can facilitate this goal.

A class survey of law enforcement professionals at LEMIT Module I in February and another at Module II in October 2003 was conducted to determine the incidence of secondary collisions occurring in the variety of law enforcement departments being represented. There were 25 students for each module who were polled by the surveys

asking whether the agency they work for provides training to prevent secondary collisions.

An analysis of the literature and the results of the survey convey that the law enforcement and public safety community can improve on what it is already doing to prevent secondary collisions at traffic crash scenes.

FINDINGS

Although many law enforcement agencies have some type of informal traffic safety programs within their departments they still suffer from secondary collisions. These and other departments can benefit from formalized training and by applying Roadside Encounters Safety Tactics. Reducing secondary collisions will require training the public as well as public safety personnel.

There are many departments who do not provide any level of training in the prevention of secondary collisions to there own officers. Yet there are agencies that are dedicated to such training as evidenced through The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Office of Traffic Injury Control Programs. Who in partnership with the National Sheriffs' Association sponsors a program for law enforcement agencies through which an agency can send an officer to Washington, D.C. for an assignment. These officers help develop state-of-the-art resource materials and work not only to improve enforcement strategies but traffic safety programs as well (National Sheriff's Association, Nov/Dec 2002).

An article published for members of AAA Texas raises public awareness by describing the Texas "Move over Law" requiring motorists to slow down or move over

when passing a stationary emergency vehicle displaying flashing lights. The article includes the rate of speeds and a breakdown of the fines (Texas Journey, Sep/Oct 2003). Public education can help prevent more roadside accidents by first by emphasizing the proper way to yield to an emergency vehicle in driver's education classes. Reiterating that slower traffic keeps right and that the inside lane is for passing only. Then there needs to be a constant reminder through the various media available to the public in the community and in the defensive driving courses.

Public safety personnel must connect with the public if they are to direct traffic. Traffic control is both an art and a science. It requires a certain amount of human creativity in providing guidance for others and changing chaos to order. But It is also involves applying specific rules, which will produce specific results. Diverting traffic around a traffic accident or other disaster scene and avoiding the emergency equipment parked in the vicinity. The police officer has an array of equipment at his disposal. One of the most important tools to direct traffic is a whistle. Officers should not attempt to direct traffic silently while only using arm and hand gestures without verbal contact. Yet it is difficult to amplify your voice in traffic and inside of vehicles. The unique sound of the whistle will usually be audible through automobile noise and other sounds that surround an intersection; it is distinctive and it penetrates. It allows the officer to be heard and recognized (Basham, 1978). Other equipment currently in market improves the officer's visibility on the road. Law Enforcement Technology has an article on LED warning lights and gloves and AW Direct markets Hi-Visibility products in one of their catalogues (Olsen, 2003). One can choose from a variety of emergency lighting and

reflective clothing. Gall's promotes similar products as does Neese Industries, Streicher's in their Spiewak rain jackets and Daynite reflective gloves.

The author of Traffic Management and Collision Investigation lists 10 elements of collision scene management that the traffic collision investigator should prioritize. He lists Protecting the Scene as the third element but suggests that the investigator be flexible enough to take a somewhat different approach to each collision depending on the circumstances. In protecting the scene, he recommends using a combination of 8 reflective cones and 8 flares (if there are not any flammables to avoid) laid out in a pattern to guide traffic around the collision scene. He also points out the human factors that pose a danger to the officer investigating a collision. There are cultural differences, where customs could be in conflict with laws in the U.S. The mood and temperament of the driver may be affected by the environment. Then there is the driver's perception, intelligence, emotion and the will to act. These physiological factors as well as the driver's hearing or vision which may be impaired, play a part in the driver's ability to drive safely.

Safety Rules:

1. Don't turn your back to traffic except for brief moments when there is no oncoming traffic.
2. Don't trust warning devices, lights, flares, barricades, or other officers to slow or redirect oncoming traffic.
3. At intersection collisions, place the traffic control signals on flashing red to stop all traffic.
4. Keep a wary eye on traffic to assure compliance.

5. Take nothing for granted in terms of the other driver.

6. Run to a position of safety when a secondary collision seems imminent.

He recommends the right-hand approach to the violator's car to avoid be struck by passing vehicles. He states that when officers offset the patrol vehicle to the rear and to the left of the violator's vehicle leaves less room for passing traffic. Then the officer has to divide his attention between the violator and approaching traffic (Clark, 1982).

Normally, these roadside duties are called "traffic control." Yet, many times the officer is not actively watching or directing approaching traffic. Instead, the officer sits in a cruiser reading a book or talking on the phone. The officer expects that the presence of the police car is sufficient to gain driver compliance to posted construction zone signs.

The presence of a marked police vehicle and the sight of a roadside encounter with an occasional motorist have a "halo effect" on other drivers at least for a brief period after they pass at his location. The driver becomes more conscientious and is reminded by having seen the officer engaged in traffic enforcement that his own driving habits require his full attention. Reaction by motorists to officers visible on the roadside has a positive effect on traffic safety. The presence of marked traffic enforcement vehicles has a deterrent effect on the unsafe driving habits of motorists (Basham, 1978).

The class survey of law enforcement professionals at the Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas, Modules I and II asked two questions:

1. Does your department provide any level of training in the prevention of secondary collisions where officers are investigating accident scenes or collisions during traffic stops and other duties performed on public roadways?
2. Has your department incurred any loss or has any officer in your department been a victim of or as a result of a secondary collision?

Out of the forty-two respondents, only ten departments provide some level of training in the prevention of secondary collisions while thirty-two do not. Eighteen of the departments incurred a loss or injury to an officer while twenty-four did not.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

A traffic crash scene contains repetitive types of hazards that officers work in daily. Dangers posed by approaching traffic must be eliminated as best as possible to reduce the number of secondary collisions involving police officers and police cruisers. What can command staff do to reduce the incidence of secondary collisions in their agencies?

While a higher level of training is essential in the prevention of accidents it is not the only element that will lower the incidence of secondary collisions. The innate need to survive in humans is another determinant in accident prevention. It is what keeps people alive. It is a combination of complacency and a pre-occupation with the crash scene that leaves most officers exposed to the dangers of roadside collisions and could best be eliminated by constantly practicing R.E.S.T. This will raise the awareness level and serve as a reminder of the dangers and that secondary collisions actually happen more than people would like to believe.

Law enforcement administrators who take a pro-active role in looking at their number of secondary collisions, examining what they are already doing, can take it a step further by creatively developing improved methods to R.E.S.T. The departments who actively train and invest human and other resources into traffic safety will have lower incidence of secondary traffic collisions.

The findings of this research and conclusions support that training alone is not sufficient to lower the incidence of secondary collisions. These collisions are minimized by increased command staff involvement in continually developing improved methods of R.E.S.T. Some of the survey respondents guessed at their answers to both questions and the survey did not answer the question concerning involvement by command staff in each agency.

The application of R.E.S.T. will benefit every police department that provides traffic safety from time to time to the community that it serves. Departments will provide a safer environment for their officers to work in and will reduce the loss of their fleet inventory. The people that use the public roadways will enjoy safer roads with fewer fatalities and less property loss.

It is important to note that while traffic safety is the responsibility of every officer on through the department head, accountability must fall squarely on a committee or person whose job is to monitor secondary collisions. This author recommends creating a team of officers and a supervisor to review recent secondary collisions in this city, surrounding areas and nationwide. The team would then develop tactics to prevent secondary collisions at traffic accident investigation scenes, traffic stops and other duties performed by officers on public roadways. These tactics can be formalized into training recommendations under the title of Roadside Encounters Safety

Tactics, R.E.S.T. The team will be tasked with improving what it is already doing to prevent secondary collisions and reducing the rate of such accidents in the law enforcement community.

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